

# Medieval English Women in Rural and Urban Domestic Space

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Medieval European society did not have strong gender divisions in its domestic arrangements such as that found in the harems of Islamic society, yet the social assumptions that underlay gendered divisions of space had implications for where women could be and what would happen to them if they moved outside that space. A woman's reputation might hinge on her ability to remain in a particular, acceptable space. The space might be a house, village, or city quarter depending on her economic activity and her social class. In this paper I look at the spaces that women traditionally occupied, the advice literature that trained women to be in that space, and the risks that arose for women who moved beyond their allotted space. I present parallel discussions of the domestic space that rural and urban women occupied and an instance in each case of spaces that placed women at risk: for rural women, fields, and for urban women, taverns.

Anthropologists have noted that women's access to the entire environment was restricted. Pierre Bourdieu, in his fieldwork among the Berbers, observed that the houses were literally divided into male and female space. The division of the house extended into the value judgments associated with this division and metaphors for the dominance of the male over the female—male space over female space.<sup>1</sup> While European society did not divide houses in this manner, Bourdieu's larger point is important for our consideration of the meaning of controlling access to space. The power of dominant groups lies, in part, in their ability to control the ordering of space for subservient groups. Martine Segalen's exploration of the division of male and female space among the French peasants is valuable because she brings her observations to a rural, European situation. She notes that there was a "female house" and a "male outside." When women went outside the house, they did so in the company of other women. Men's space was the fields. Thus, she observed, not only were tasks divided in the peasant communities, but also the allocation of space.<sup>2</sup> The spaces that were considered male and female in Europe did not usu-

<sup>1</sup>P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. R. Nice (Cambridge, 1977), 90–91, 160–63. See also R. A. Levine and S. E. Levine, "House Design and the Self in an African Culture," in *Body and Space: Symbolic Models of Unity and Division in African Cosmology and Experience*, ed. A. Jacobson-Widding (Uppsala, 1991), 155–73, in which the houses and rooms define the stages of life for men and women.

<sup>2</sup>M. Segalen, *Mari et femme dans la société paysanne*, Bibliothèque d'ethnologie historique (Paris, 1980). In her *Historical Anthropology of the Family*, trans. J. C. Whitehouse and S. Matthews (Cambridge, 1986), 205–12, 218–19, she extends the observation to other preindustrial classes.

ally imply an exclusivity by sex (with the exception of some sacred space). Men did not congregate alone in taverns or temples, and women were not kept in women's quarters. Women did work in the fields at harvest, and men lived in the houses. Nonetheless, strong custom dictated how women moved in the spaces that men dominated. To break these rules, as Mary Douglas observed, made women "polluting" and "dangerous."<sup>3</sup> Thus, as we shall see, women who broke the codes limiting their movement outside their allotted physical space were subject to harassment.

Segalen's observations about the space of a peasant woman's sphere of activity receive confirmation from the study of accidental deaths recorded in fourteenth-century English coroners' inquests. Medieval coroners, like modern ones, were charged with investigating all cases of violent death. Thus their duty was to inquire about all homicides, suicides, and misadventures. The inquests can, at their fullest, provide a wealth of detail about the scene of the tragedy. The inquests give the name of the accused, the date, and sometimes the day of the accident and age of the victim, and the place, activity, and instrument that caused the death.

In the rural coroners' inquests, which reflect the life of the peasants, my sample included one thousand adult males and females for whom a clear place of accident could be established; the differences were striking. Only 12 percent of the men compared to 30 percent of the women died in their homes. Private property such as a neighbor's house or garden area, manor house, and so on were the place of death of only 6 percent of the men but 9 percent of the women. In public areas within the village, such as greens, streets, highways, churches, and markets, women again predominated, with 22 percent of their accidents there compared to men's 18 percent. But if we look at fields, marl pits, forest, and so on, we find that 38 percent of men had accidents there, while only 18 percent of the women did. Likewise, men had 4 percent more of their accidents in waterways. The aggregate picture is more dramatic than the breakdown into various categories. Women had 61 percent of their accidents within their home and village, while men had only 36 percent in this limited area.

The numerical breakdown of women's place of accidental death correlates with the type of activities that caused them. Most of the women's accidents (37%) correlated with their activities of maintaining and provisioning the household, including food preparation, laundry, brewing, getting water, starting fires, collecting fruits, and working with domestic animals. For both sexes accidents involved in moving from one place to another—including walking, carting, horseback riding, and boating—were high, involving 30 percent of the women's accidents and 43 percent of the men's. But when one looks at work outside the village and house, 19 percent of the men compared to 4 percent of the women died in agricultural accidents, and 4 percent of the men and no women died in activities related to construction and carpentry.<sup>4</sup>

If we look at the landscape of Europe today for evidence of women's use of space, we find it in the villages rather than the fields. The ridges and furrows that create a wash-

<sup>3</sup>M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, 1966), 140–58, discusses the interplay between men and women and ideas about pollution. V. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York, 1969), 109–11, has spoken about the perceived danger of the weak in societies.

<sup>4</sup>B. A. Hanawalt, *The Ties That Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (New York, 1986); see tables, 271.

board effect on the land, particularly when seen in aerial photographs, are peasant men's legacy, but in the deserted villages and in archaeological sites, the U-shaped depressions mark the location of a former house floor formed by the sweeping of the housewife's broom.

In the commission of crime, women also stayed near their homes. Their crimes were concentrated in burglary, larceny, and receiving of stolen property or known felons. The first two crimes were most likely to be committed against neighbors in the same village, and the last was, of course, a crime committed in their own home. It was the men who committed crimes in the fields, forests, and highways.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, women were more likely to be victims of homicide in their homes or village rather than in the fields.<sup>6</sup>

When peasant women moved outside the home or village, however, they put themselves into a situation of risk. Joan of Arc's inquisitors continually suggested by their questions that Joan had put her virginity at risk by going to the fields to tend sheep, and she continually replied that she had not herded. She maintained that she had been raised in her father's house and her mother taught her to sew. She left her father's house once to go to that of a woman named La Rousse when the Burgundians threatened, but "in this house she did the household tasks, and did not go into the fields to keep sheep or other animals." At another session she was asked if she took animals to pasture, and she replied that "since she had grown up and reached years of understanding, she did not look after them; but she did help drive them to the meadows, and to a castle called l'Ile, for fear of the soldiers."<sup>7</sup> The theme of risk for women in the fields and pastures also appears in the French play *Robin and Marion*, in which a knight approaches Marion while she is out tending her flocks and tries to abduct her.<sup>8</sup>

Cases from the coroners' inquests and trial records show that the pastoral environment, separated as it was from the women's normal space of the village, placed young women in a vulnerable position. Joan's inquisitors were not forming their questions from prejudice alone. For instance, Agnes, daughter of John de Enovere, appealed Hugh Fitz Thomas le Renur of rape (i.e., she made a legal accusation). Agnes was seven years old at the time and was minding sheep in the fields. Hugh came upon her and violently threw her onto the ground in order to rape her, squeezing her so hard that blood issued from her mouth and nose.<sup>9</sup> Another woman, Emma, daughter of Richard Toky of Southill, went to the woods to collect firewood. Walter Gargolf of Stanford came, carrying

<sup>5</sup>B. A. Hanawalt, *Crime and Conflict in Medieval Communities, 1300–1348* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), 120–22, 168–70.

<sup>6</sup>In general, women were not cited as victims of property crimes because their property, unless they were single or widows, belonged to their husbands. For the pattern on homicide, see J. B. Given, *Society and Homicide in Thirteenth-Century England* (Stanford, Calif., 1977), 169.

<sup>7</sup>*The Trial of Joan of Arc, Being the Verbatim Report of the Proceedings from the Orleans Manuscript*, trans. W. S. Scott (Westport, Conn., 1956), 66–67, 74–75.

<sup>8</sup>*Five Comedies of Medieval France*, trans. O. Mandel (New York, 1970), 85–104. See also K. Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law* (Philadelphia, 1991). In chapter 4 she discusses the sexual violence that was characteristic of the pastourelle in which the knight deflowers the shepherdess. The undefended shepherdess was a standard of literature throughout medieval Europe, so that this is an instance where literature and the history of rape must have intersected in forming the opinions of both men and women about the rape situation.

<sup>9</sup>H. N. Schneebach, "The Law of Felony in Medieval England from the Accession of Edward I until the Mid-Fourteenth Century" (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1973), 464–67.

a bow and a small sheaf of arrows, took hold of Emma, and tried to throw her to the ground and deflower her, but she immediately shouted, and her father, who was working nearby, came. Gargolf shot and killed her father and then fled.<sup>10</sup>

It was not simply country lasses who were at risk of rape when they departed from women's normal space. Margery Kemp, a mature, middle-aged woman, explained that she accompanied her widowed daughter-in-law back to Germany because a woman traveling alone was at risk of rape. After she delivered the daughter-in-law to her family, Margery made the return trip herself and took a side trip to Aachen. On this trip she greatly feared that she would be raped, and one man asked her why she was traveling alone considering the risk she was taking.<sup>11</sup>

The urban environment was one in which men and women mixed throughout the day. Business was conducted in shops and cellars of homes as well as in the halls of the houses themselves. Apprentices, servants, merchants, and artisans mingled with the family of the master. Many people lived in crowded conditions in tenements so that both men and women were constantly coming and going on the stairs of the three-storied houses. In the streets as well the sexes mingled. One might assume that the urban environment was not as conscious of the space that a woman could occupy. Evidence from advice literature, coroners' inquests, and other legal cases argues against this assumption. Women's space could be confined by means other than simple geography: clothing, the way of walking, and even injunctions of speech could regulate a woman's access to physical space.

Advice literature, designed chiefly by men for urban and middle-class women, emphasized the behavior of women when they moved outside their homes. In the poem, "How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter," the daughter is told that her place is the home, but since she must go out she should keep her eyes down when she is in the streets. The poem carefully spells out the dangers of public places.

An wan thou goist in the way, go thou not to faste,  
Braundishe not with thin heed, thi schuldris thou ne caste;  
Haue thou not to manye wordis; to swere be thou not leefe,  
For alle such maners comen to an yuel preef:  
For he that cacchith to him an yuel name,  
It is to him a foule fame,  
Mi Leue childe.

Further warnings include not getting drunk in taverns, not going house to house buying beer with money made from selling cloth, and not accompanying a lover to places conducive to seduction. Finally, the good daughter would not go to shows like a common strumpet, but "wone at hom, daughter, and loue thi werk myche."<sup>12</sup> While advice manuals for young men tell them to look oncomers in the eye, those for young women suggest that a way of preserving their space in public is to keep their eyes down. Women's space, therefore, could be effectively preserved by physical limitations of the movement of the head and eyes.

Not content with limiting the space that women were to occupy and their behavior

<sup>10</sup>*Bedfordshire Coroners' Rolls*, trans. R. F. Hunnisett, Bedfordshire Historical Record Society Publications 41 (1961), 27–28.

<sup>11</sup>*The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. B. A. Windeatt (Harmondsworth, 1985), 269–72, 281.

<sup>12</sup>*The Babees Book . . .*, ed. F. J. Furnival, Early English Text Society, old ser., 32 (London, 1868), 36–47.

when they moved outside that space, male moralists also imposed regulations on what women were to wear. Dress codes are, of course, another way of confining women, in this case within an outer layer of cloth. The nun's veil is the most apparent of the dress codes, but in London and many cities of Europe, city fathers regulated headdress: "No woman of the town shall henceforth go to the market nor into the highway out of her house with a hood furred with budge, whether it be of lamb or of conies, upon pain of forfeiting her hood to the use of the Sheriffs, except dames who wear furred capes and hoods of which bear fur such as they wish. . . . Brewsters, nurses, other servants, and women of disreputable character adorn themselves and wear hoods furred with gros veer and miniver after the manner of reputable [women]." <sup>13</sup> Not only headdress, but a variety of clothing items determined the properly clad woman in public. <sup>14</sup> Medieval women's head-dresses were either veils or hoods that served like horse blinders when they walked in the streets. Cloaks covered the body to the toes.

The obverse of city regulation for respectable women was the clothing signifiers that cities prescribed for prostitutes. In London a hood of multicolored cloth and in southern France sleeves and headdress distinguished prostitutes. Italy prohibited prostitutes from wearing veils or mantles like respectable women and required them to wear a yellow strip denoting their trade. <sup>15</sup>

Even though the regulation of women's dress and behavior in cities indicates that women were more frequently mingling with men in the streets, women still moved within a narrower confine than men. Men took their regulations seriously not only as restrictions on urban women, but also as guides for their own behavior with regard to women. An example from the London Goldsmith's Guild tells of the degradation felt by all parties in the removal of a female from the socially accepted space. William Rothely was fined "because he . . . against all humanity, sent his maid out of his house and suffered her to lie out two nights so she was fain to borrow money to lie at the Pewter Pot to the dishonor of all the fellowship [of goldsmiths]." <sup>16</sup> By expelling his servant from her protected physical space and forcing her to stay at an inn, Rothely had disgraced himself and his guild.

The daily rounds of activities mentioned in the London coroners' inquests into accidental deaths indicate that women's activities were centered in their homes and city ward or parish. For women the home and the garden were the major places of death (50%), with streets being the location of 30 percent of their deaths. No women died in shops or workplaces, and only 10 percent on wharves or in the river. Men, however, had the majority of their fatal accidents in the river or wharf area (30%), street (18%), and shop and workplace (16%), but only 20 percent in the home. <sup>17</sup> Literature again provides examples of the uneasiness of males when urban women moved outside the city quarter. Chaucer's

<sup>13</sup> *Calendar of Letter-Books Preserved among the Archives of the Corporation of the City of London, 1275–1487*, Letter Book A, ed. R. R. Sharpe (London, 1889), 220.

<sup>14</sup> D. O. Hughes, "Distinguishing Signs: Ear-rings, Jews and Franciscan Rhetoric in the Italian Renaissance City," *Past and Present* 112 (1986), 3–59.

<sup>15</sup> R. M. Karras, "The Regulation of Brothels in Later Medieval England," *Signs* 14 (1989), 421; L. Otis, *Prostitution in Medieval Society: The History of an Urban Institution in Languedoc* (Chicago, 1985), 80; J. Rossiaud, *Medieval Prostitution*, trans. L. G. Cochrane (Oxford, 1988), 64–65; Hughes, "Distinguishing Signs," 29–30.

<sup>16</sup> T. F. Reddaway, *The Early History of the Goldsmith's Company, 1327–1509* (London, 1975), 151.

<sup>17</sup> The total sample size is 267 accidental deaths from 1275 to 1341. Cases appear in *Calendar of Coroners' Rolls of the City of London, A.D. 1300–1378*, ed. R. R. Sharpe (London, 1913); Public Record Office Just 2/94A; and *Calendar of Letter-Books of the City of London, Letter Book B*, ed. R. R. Sharpe (London, 1900), 256–80.

Wife of Bath is both a much traveled and much ridiculed woman. Her honor is questioned because she traveled alone beyond Bath.

Like the Wife of Bath, widows of craftsmen and merchants, or in London married women acting as *femme sole*, ventured into the broader marketplace or dealt in substantial production. But even there they were limited to their own cities. They could not accompany their goods to trade fairs or other towns.<sup>18</sup> Women in lesser trades such as hucksters traveled only to markets and back to their quarter of the city to sell their goods in the street. In the urban environment, therefore, the home, either natal or that of a master, was the chief place of living, work, and socializing for women.

Prostitutes were the other group of women who escaped the strictures of confinement to household and shop, but, unlike respectable women, did not keep their eyes down when they were in the street but openly invited invasion of their physical, bodily space. In this respect they were between respectable women, who were not to make eye contact in order to preserve private space, and men, who were to look about them in order to dominate the public space. Prostitutes looked about them and made eye contact in order to invite invasion of private space. But London city magistrates, like those in Europe, increasingly sought to confine prostitutes to particular spaces as well. Only certain lanes in London could be the abode of prostitutes, and the independent borough across the Thames, Southwark, was their chief habitat.<sup>19</sup>

For urban women, taverns were ambiguous spaces that implied risk to reputation and even violence, much as fields and pastures were risky places for village women. Taverns and inns were among the most complex institutions of medieval social life and social regulation because they occupied contradictory roles both in reality and in the mentality of the age. Their very interior spaces were ambiguous territories. On the one hand, the guests were invited to share domestic and primarily female space: the main living area or hall, where food and drink were served, and the bedchambers. On the other hand, the men and women who congregated in breweries, ale houses, taverns, and inns were held in general suspicion as potentially disorderly. Another ambiguity was that inns and taverns were the resort of ordinary citizens, laborers, and servants, as well as of foreigners from other countries, transient English, and a general rabble of rootless and possibly dishonest people.

To speak of a drinking establishment as domestic, female space requires an explanation. Given the gendered division of labor and space, the production and consumption of alcohol stand out as an economic and social area in which traditional distinctions were blurred. In the countryside, brewing and running a tavern were extensions of domestic labor and domestic space, with women making and buying ale for home consumption. But the brewster's house was also a social gathering place frequented by both women and men. In cities, where brewing was more professional and more male-dominated, taverns were, like their nineteenth-century descendants, a recreation area away from the

<sup>18</sup>K. L. Reyerson, "Women in Business in Medieval Montpellier," 117–44; M. Kowaleski, "Women's Work in a Market Town: Exeter in the Late Fourteenth Century," 145–60; and M. C. Howell, "Women, the Family Economy, and the Structures of Market Production in Cities of Northern Europe during the Late Middle Ages," 198–222, all in *Women and Work in Preindustrial Europe*, ed. B. A. Hanawalt (Bloomington, Ind., 1986).

<sup>19</sup>For a complete discussion, see R. M. Karras, *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* (New York, 1996).

cramped rooming quarters of a town or city and a resting place for travelers and foreigners. Taverns and inns retained many features of the home atmosphere, but women associated with them had a very bad reputation—offering sex as well as other domestic comforts.

Every female role associated with taverns and inns turned the domestic nature of the association on end and implied tainted womanhood. The disparaging term “ale-wife” was not the only insult attached to women associated with brewing and drink. For a *materfamilias* (proprietary) of a tavern, the titles of “procurer” or “bawd” were ready to the tongue, and for the tapster, the association with prostitution was all too much of a stereotype. As we have seen, in a mid-fourteenth-century London ordinance, brewsters were lumped with nurses, other servants, and “women of disreputable character” in a prohibition against adorning themselves with furred hoods.

Women who worked in the service occupations in taverns were at risk of being pimped by their master and mistress for the sexual satisfaction of male customers. Thus Thomasina Newton was said, in the London Consistory Court, to have worked for William Basseloy, the *paterfamilias* of a tavern who acted as her pimp. The owner of “The Busche” tavern was accused of pimping for his two servants, Mandeleyn and Alice. Others were accused of adultery with members of their establishment, as was the proprietor of “The Lodyn Proche” with his tapster, Mariota; and William le Hostler of “Le Crown” was said to have gotten his servant, Matrosa, pregnant and to have been the father of her daughter.<sup>20</sup> The *materfamilias* was no better than her male counterpart. The one who kept “le tavern near the church” was accused of adultery with her servant, and the one running “Le Schippe” procured her tapster as a prostitute.<sup>21</sup> The tapsters themselves acquired a neighborhood reputation. Elizabeth Machyn, tapster of the “Red Lyon,” was accused of adultery, and the neighbors said that she did the same at “Le Cok” in Woodstreet, while Mariona, who was the sometime tapster at “The Vine” in the parish of St. Helen and at “The Choker” in the high street, was accused of being “a common scandalizer (*scandilizatrix*) especially with Thomas, one of the deacons of St. Paul.”<sup>22</sup>

Taverns provided opportunities for pimps and prostitutes that apparently went unregulated by the proprietors. John Mande and his wife pimped his sister at a tavern, and others made contacts with prostitutes at taverns.<sup>23</sup> “The Pye” in Quenhithe had a reputation as a place “which is a good shadowing for thieves and many evil bargains have been made there, and many strumpets and pimps have their covert there, and leisure to make their false covenants.” The neighbors wanted it closed at night.<sup>24</sup>

Suspicion fell on ordinary female patrons of taverns as well as on servants and known prostitutes. The “Good Wife” cautions her daughter that she should not spend in taverns all the money that she makes selling her cloth in the city because “they that taverns haunt/ From thrift soon come to want.” The first warning is that taverns are a place to throw away money; the second warning is about the effects of drunkenness on reputation.

<sup>20</sup> London Guildhall, Consistory Court 9064/1, ms. 5, 5v, 6, 26v, 30, 31, 64v, 65, 66, 81v, 114, 116, 116v, 119, 119v, 122v, 155v. P. R. O. C1/136/79. John Godwynn and his wife, Agnes, were accused in the wardmote of Billingsgate of keeping misrule in an inn called “The Mermaid” held on lease from the Chamberlain of London.

<sup>21</sup> Guildhall, Consistory Court 9064/1, ms. 68, 83, 84, 91v.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., ms. 110v, 114v.

<sup>23</sup> Corporation of London Record Office, Repertory 5, fol. 52–52v.

<sup>24</sup> Guildhall, Consistory Court 9064/1, ms. 143, 43, 32.

And if thou be in any place where good ale is aloft,  
 Whether that thou serve thereof or that thou sit soft,  
 Measurably thou take thereof, that thou fall in no blame  
 For if thou be often drunk, it falleth to thy shame.  
 For those that be often drunk—  
 Thrift is from them sunk,  
 My lief child.<sup>25</sup>

The poem presumes that the young woman might either be a tapster or a patron.

The space of inns and taverns, being domestic, facilitated not only sexual contacts but also violence between men and women. For instance, five men with accomplices were indicted for being present with arms at the inn of John Fodard, a hostler, in Cornhill. The charge was that they broke into Katherine de Brewes' chamber and dragged her along the floor by her arms and clothing so that she was naked below the waist and her hair was hanging over her bosom. She was only saved when the servants and neighbors came and rescued her.<sup>26</sup>

In 1325 Walter de Benygtone and seventeen companions came to the brewhouse of Gilbert de Mordone with stones in their hoods, swords, knives, and other weapons. They sat in the tavern drinking four gallons of ale. Their objective was to seize Emma, daughter of the late Robert Pourte and a ward of Gilbert. Mabel, Gilbert's wife, and Geoffrey, his brewer, asked them to leave. They refused, saying that it was a public tavern and they had the right to stay and drink. Mabel took Emma to an upper chamber, while the men dealt with the ruffians. A fight ensued and spilled into the streets, where the neighbors came to the rescue, and one of the thugs was killed. In another brawl, two men were quietly playing checkers in a tavern when some rowdies came in and laid a woman across the checker board.<sup>27</sup>

This paper does not argue that the *only* way that medieval society defined and controlled women was by limiting their movements to certain well-defined areas, but restrictions over their spatial freedom was one of the simplest means of social control that modern historians have largely overlooked. The space that women could occupy with freedom of movement was the home, the village, and the city quarter (I leave out castles and nunneries from this paper). If they moved outside this area, they did so with proper dress, demeanor, and escort, or they risked impingement on their honor or on their persons. Spatial confinement was not an unconscious aspect of medieval society, but rather a theme that appeared in all types of medieval literature. Once the space of honorable women was defined and its centrality well established, marginal women could be easily defined as those who wandered outside the confines. For country women, the area outside the village was dangerous; for city dwellers, taverns posed a risk to reputation and of violent assault.

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<sup>25</sup>*The Babees Book*, ed. Furnival, 34–35.

<sup>26</sup>*Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls of the City of London, 1323–1482*, ed. A. H. Thomas, II (Cambridge, 1929), 184.

<sup>27</sup>*Coroners' Rolls of the City of London*, ed. Sharpe, 17–18, 114–16.